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To Kill Iraq

May 2003 *(updated)*

In October 2002, after several days of full-dress debate in the House and Senate, the US Congress fell into line behind almost-elected president George W. Bush, giving him a mandate to launch a massive military assault against the already battered nation of Iraq. The discourse in Congress was marked by its usual cowardice. Even many of the senators and representatives who voted against the president's resolution did so on the narrowest procedural grounds, taking pains to tell how they too detested Saddam Hussein, how they agreed with the president on many points, how something needed to be done about Iraq but not just yet, not quite in this way. So it is with Congress: so much political discourse in so narrow a political space. Few of the members dared to question the unexamined assumptions about US virtue, and the imperial right of US leaders to decide which nations shall live and which shall die. Few, if any, pointed to the continual bloody stream of war crimes committed by a succession of arrogant US administrations in blatant violation of human rights and international law.

Pretexts for War

Bush and other members of his administration gave varied and unpersuasive reasons to justify the "war"—actually a one-sided massacre—against Iraq. They claimed it was necessary to insure the safety and security of the Middle East and of the United States itself, for Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear missiles. But as of 1998, UN inspection teams determined that Iraq had no such nuclear capability and actually had been in compliance with yearly disarmament inspections. And, as of February 2003, UN inspection teams found little to support Bush's case for aggression, despite Colin Powell's slide-show shenanigans before the United Nations.

As for the fact that Iraq once had factories that produced chemical and bacteriological weapons, whose fault was that? It was the United States that supplied such things to Saddam. This is one of several key facts about past US-Iraq relations that the corporate media have consistently suppressed. In any case, according to UN inspection reports, Iraq's C&B; warfare capability has been dismantled. Still the Bushites keep talking about Iraq's dangerous "potential." As reported by the Associated Press (2 November 2002), Undersecretary of State John Bolton claimed that "Iraq would be able to develop a nuclear weapon within a year if it gets the right technology." If it gets the right technology? The truistic nature of this assertion has gone unnoticed. Djibouti,

Qatar, and New Jersey would be able to develop nuclear weapons if they got "the right technology."

Through September and October of 2002, the White House made it clear that Iraq would be attacked if it had weapons of mass destruction. Then in November 2002, Bush announced he would attack if Saddam *denied* that he had weapons of mass destruction. So if the Iraqis admit having such weapons, they will be bombed; and if they deny having them, they still will be bombed—whether they have them or not.

The Bushites also charged Iraq with allowing al Qaeda terrorists to operate within its territory. But US intelligence sources themselves let it be known that the Iraqi government was not connected to Islamic terrorist organizations. In closed sessions with a House committee, when administration officials were repeatedly asked whether they had information of an imminent terrorist threat from Saddam against US citizens, they stated unequivocally that they had no such evidence (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 September 2002). Truth be told, the Bush family has closer ties to the bin Laden family than does Saddam Hussein. No mention is made of how US leaders themselves have waged death squad terrorist campaigns in scores of countries, and how they have allowed terrorists to train and operate within our own territory, including a mass murderer like Orlando Bosch. Convicted of blowing up a Cuban airliner, Bosch walks free in Miami.

Bush and company seized upon yet another pretext for war: Saddam has committed war crimes and acts of aggression, including the war against Iran and the massacre of Kurds. But the Pentagon's own study found that the gassing of Kurds at Halabja was committed by the Iranians, not the Iraqis (*New York Times*, 24 January 2003). Another seldom mentioned fact: US leaders gave Iraq encouragement and military support in its war against Iran. And if war crimes and aggression are the issue, there are the US invasions of Grenada and Panama to consider, and the US-sponsored wars of attrition against civilian targets in Mozambique, Angola, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Yugoslavia, and scores of other places, leaving hundreds of thousands dead. There is no communist state or "rogue nation" that has such a horrific record of military aggression against other countries over the last two decades.

With all the various pretexts for war ringing hollow, the Bushites resorted to the final indictment: Saddam was a dictator. The United States stood for democracy and human rights. It followed that US leaders were obliged to use force and violence to effect "regime change" in Iraq. Again, we might raise questions. There is no denying that Saddam is a dictator, but how did he and his crew ever come to power? Saddam's conservative wing of the Ba'ath party was backed by the CIA. They were enlisted to destroy the Iraqi popular revolution and slaughter every democrat, left-progressive, and communist they could get hold of, which indeed they did, including the progressive wing of the Ba'ath party itself—another fact that US media have let slide down the memory hole. Saddam was Washington's poster boy until the end of the Cold War.

So why has George II, like his daddy, targeted Iraq? When individuals keep providing new and different explanations to justify a particular action, they most likely are lying. So with political leaders and policymakers. Having seen that the pretexts given by the White House to justify war are palpably false, some people conclude that the administration is befuddled or even "deranged." But just because they are trying to mislead and confuse the public does not perforce mean they themselves are misled and confused. Rather it might be that they have

reasons which they prefer not to see publicized and debated, for then it would become evident that US policies of the kind leveled against Iraq advance the interests of the rich and powerful at much cost to the American people and every other people on the face of the earth. Here I think are the real reasons for the US aggression against Iraq.

Global Politico-Economic Supremacy

A central US goal, as enunciated by the little Dr. Strangeloves who inhabit the upper echelons of policymaking in the Bush administration, is to perpetuate US global supremacy. The objective is not just power for its own sake but power to insure plutocratic control of the planet, power to privatize and deregulate the economies of every nation in the world, to hoist upon the backs of peoples everywhere-including the people of North America—the blessings of an untrammeled "free market" corporate capitalism. The struggle is between those who believe that the land, labor, capital, technology, and markets of the world should be dedicated to maximizing capital accumulation for the few, and those who believe that these things should be used primarily for the communal benefit and socio-economic development of the many.

The goal is to insure not merely the supremacy of global capitalism as such, but the supremacy of *US* global capitalism by preventing the emergence of any other potentially competing superpower or, for that matter, any potentially competing *regional* power. Iraq is a case in point. Some nations in the Middle East have oil but no water; others have water but no oil. Iraq is the only one with plenty of both, along with a good agricultural base-although much of its fertile land is now much contaminated by the depleted uranium dropped upon it during the 1991 Gulf War bombings.

In earlier times, Iraq's oil was completely owned by US, British, and other Western companies. In 1958 there was a popular revolution in Iraq. Ten years later, the rightwing of the Ba'ath party took power, with Saddam Hussein serving as point man for the CIA. His assignment was to undo the bourgeois-democratic revolution, as I have already noted. But instead of acting as a compradore collaborator to Western investors in the style of Nicaragua's Somoza, Chile's Pinochet, Peru's Fujimora, and numerous others, Saddam and his cohorts nationalized the Iraqi oil industry in 1972, ejected the Western profiteers, and pursued policies of public development and economic nationalism. By 1990, Iraq had the highest standard of living in the Middle East (which may not be saying all that much). It was evident that the US had failed to rollback the gains of the 1958 revolution. But the awful destruction delivered upon Iraq both by the Gulf War and the subsequent decade of intermittent bombings and severe economic sanctions did achieve a kind of counterrevolutionary rollback from afar.

Soon after the overthrow of the Soviet Union, US leaders decided that Third World development no longer needed to be tolerated. Just as Yugoslavia served as a "bad" example in Europe, so Iraq served as a bad example to other nations in the Middle East. The last thing the plutocrats in Washington want in that region is independent, self-defining developing nations that wish to control their own land, labor, and natural resources.

US economic and military power has been repeatedly used to suppress competing systems. Self-defining countries like Cuba, Iraq, and Yugoslavia are targeted. Consider Yugoslavia. It showed no desire to become part of the European Union and absolutely no interest in joining NATO. It had an economy that had many problems but was still relatively prosperous, with some 80 percent of it publicly owned. (Whether this qualified Yugoslavia as a *socialist* country in the

eyes of all leftists is not the question. It was all *too* socialist for US policymakers.) The wars of secession and attrition waged against Yugoslavia—all in the name of human rights and democracy—destroyed that country's economic infrastructure and fractured it into a cluster of poor, powerless, right-wing mini-republics, whose economies are being privatized, deregulated, deindustrialized, and opened to Western corporate penetration on terms that are completely favorable to the investors. We see this happening most recently in Serbia. The US corporate media have ignored Serbia since Milosevic was arrested and the democratically elected parliament-with a first-time Socialist Party majority-was overthrown. Under the new "pro-West" government, everything in Serbia is now being privatized at garage sale prices. Human service, jobs, and pension funds are disappearing. Unemployment, inflation, and poverty are skyrocketing, as is crime, hunger, homelessness, prostitution, and suicide.

Judging from what has been happening in Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Panama, Grenada, and elsewhere—we can anticipate that the same thing is in store for Iraq following a US occupation. An Iraqi puppet government will be put in place, headed by someone every bit as subservient to the White House as Tony Blair. The Iraqi state-owned media will become "free and independent" by being handed over to rich conservative private corporations. Anything even remotely critical of US foreign policy and free market capitalism will be deprived of an effective platform. Conservative political parties, heavily financed by US sources, will outspend any leftist groupings that might emerge. On this steeply unleveled playing field, US advisors will conduct US-style "democratic elections," perhaps replicating the admirable results produced in Florida and elsewhere. Just about everything in the Iraqi economy will be privatized at giveaway prices. Poverty and underemployment, already high, will climb precipitously. So will the Iraqi national debt, as international loans are floated in order to help the Iraqis pay for their own victimization. Public services will dwindle to nothing, and Iraq will suffer even more misery than it does today. We are being asked to believe that the Iraqi people are willing to endure another battering by US military forces in order to reach this free-market paradise.

Natural Resource Grab

Another reason for targeting Iraq can be summed up in one word: oil. Along with maintaining the overall global system of expropriation, US leaders are interested in more immediate old-time colonial plunder. The present White House leadership is composed of oil men who are both sorely tempted and threatened by Iraq's oil reserve, one of the largest in the world. With 113 billion barrels at $35 a barrel, Iraq's supply comes to almost $4 *trillion* dollars. But not a drop of it belongs to the US oil cartel; it is all state owned. Baghdad has offered exploratory concessions to France, China, Russia, Brazil, Italy, and Malaysia. But with a US takeover of Iraq and a new puppet regime in place, all these agreements may be subject to cancellation. We may soon witness the biggest oil grab in the history of Third World colonialism by US oil companies aided and abetted by the US government.

One thing that US leaders were interested in doing with Iraqi oil—given the glut and slumping price of crude during the late 1990s—was keep it off the market for awhile. As the London *Financial Times* (24 February 1998) reported, oil prices fell sharply because the agreement between the United Nations and Iraq that would allow Baghdad to sell oil on the world market "could lead to much larger volumes of Iraqi crude oil competing for market shares." The *San Francisco Chronicle* (22 February 1998) headlined its story "IRAQ'S OIL POSES THREAT TO

THE WEST.' In fact, Iraqi crude posed no threat to "the West" only to Western oil investors. If Iraq were able to reenter the international oil market, the *Chronicle* reported, "it would devalue British North Sea oil, undermine American oil production and—much more important—it would destroy the huge profits which the United States [read, US oil companies] stands to gain from its massive investment in Caucasian oil production, especially in Azerbajian." Direct control and ownership of Iraqi oil will be the surest way to keep it off the world market when the price is not right, and the surest way to profit from its sale when oil prices rise substantially —as they have since the 1990s.

Domestic Political Gains

War and violence have been good to George W. Bush. As of September 10, 2001, his approval ratings were sagging woefully. Then came the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, swiftly followed by the newly trumpeted war against terrorism and the massive bombing and invasion of Afghanistan. Bush's approval ratings skyrocketed. But soon came the corporate scandals of 2002: Enron, WorldCom, and even more perilously Harken and Halliburton. By July, both the president and vice-president were implicated in fraudulent corporate accounting practices, making false claims of profit to pump up stock values, followed by heavy insider selling just before the stock was revealed to be nearly worthless and collapsed in price. By September, the impending war against Iraq blew this whole issue off the front pages and out of the evening news. Daddy Bush did the same thing in 1990, sending the savings and loan scandal into media limbo by waging war against that very same country.

By October 2002, the Republican party, reeling from the scandals and pegged as the party of corporate favoritism and corruption, now reemerged as the party of patriotism, national defense, and strong military leadership to gain control of both houses of Congress, winning elections it should never have won. Many Americans rallied around the flag, draped as it was around the president. Some of our compatriots, who are cynical and suspicious about politicians in everyday affairs, display an almost child-like unlimited trust and knee-jerk faith when these same politicians trumpet a need to defend US "national security" against some alien threat, real or imagined.

War also distracts the people from their economic problems, the need for decent housing, schools, and jobs, and a recession that shows no sign of easing. Since George II took office, the stock market has dropped 34 percent, unemployment has climbed 35 percent, the federal surplus of $281 billion is now a deficit of $157 billion (or more), and an additional 1.5 million people are without health insurance, bringing the total to 41 million. War has been good for the conservative agenda in general, providing record military spending, greater profits for the defense industry, and a deficit spending spree that further enriches the creditor class at the taxpayer's expense, and is used to justify more cuts in domestic human services.

War also becomes an excuse to further circumscribe our civil liberties, such as they are. The siege psychology fostered by perpetual war makes dissent all that much more "unpatriotic." Under newly enacted repressive legislation almost any critical effort against existing policy can be defined as "giving aid and comfort to terrorism." Contrary to the established myth that capitalism fosters democracy, the moneyed class has always opposed the broadening of popular rights and has always shown itself hostile to any kind of democratic activism and militancy.

Political democracy has historically been a weapon used by the people to defend themselves against the abuses of wealth. So it was in the ancient Greek and Roman republics and so it remains to this day. Consequently, the plutocrats wage war not only against the public sector and against the people's standard of living, but also against the very democratic rights that the populace utilizes to defend or advance its economic well-being.

Liberal intellectuals are never happier than when, with patronizing smiles, they can dilate on the stupidity of George W. Bush. What I have tried to show is that Bush is neither retarded nor misdirected. Given his class perspective and interests, there are compelling reasons to commit armed aggression against Iraq—and against other countries to come. It is time we dwelled less upon his malapropisms and more on his rather effective deceptions and relentless viciousness. Many decent crusaders have been defeated because of their inability to fully comprehend the utter depravity of their enemies. The more we know what we are up against, the better we can fight it.

Michael Parenti's latest books are *The Terrorism Trap* (City Lights); *To Kill a Nation* (Verso): and the 7th edition of *Democracy for the Few* (Wadsworth). And most recently, *The Assassination of Julius Caesar: A People's History of Ancient Rome*, published by The New Press.

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